EPISTLE VII

Prefatory Note.—This is the longest and most important of the Platonic Epistles, and has the best claims to authenticity. From internal evidence we may infer that it was written after the murder of Dion (in 353 B.C.) and before the overthrow of the usurper Callippus in the following year.

While the letter purports to be a message of "counsel" to Dion's friends it really contains a description and a defence of the whole course of Plato's participation in the political affairs of Sicily, and thus constitutes an elaborate *Apologia pro vita sua.*

The letter is so long and so full of digressions that a brief summary may be found useful.

323 D–326 B. Plato's policy the same as Dion's. History of Plato's early life, and how he came to form his political creed, and to stand aloof from public life at Athens owing to its corrupt state.

326 B–328 D. Plato's *first visit* to Sicily. His view of its evil social and political conditions. The friendship he formed with Dion, who came to share his ethical and political creed. How he was urged by Dion, after the death of Dionysius the Elder, to revisit Syracuse, and aid him in effecting a political reformation by training up the young Dionysius to become a philosopher-king.

328 D–330 B. Plato's *second visit* to Sicily. How he

was induced to go by the fear of seeming to prove false both to his friendship for Dion and to the cause of philosophy. But his visit proved a failure. Hostile factions slandered Dion and secured his banishment by the young Dionysius, while Plato himself was treated with suspicion. None the less, he kept doing his utmost to influence Dionysius aright.

330 C–331 D. Now Plato must turn to the main purpose of his letter, which is to give *counsel to Dion's friends*. But a counsellor, like a doctor, can only prescribe for those who are willing to act on his advice. And it is a mistake to force the unwilling or to use violent means to rectify the conduct of a father or a fatherland.

331 D–334 C. So Plato's present advice will be similar to that formerly given by him and Dion to Dionysius. They urged him to cultivate self-control and to make loyal friends, warning him by the unhappy example of his father ; and they advised him as to his policy. But slander and treachery again prevailed and Dion was exiled. But he returned and by deeds instead of words taught Dionysius in severer fashion, until treachery and slander again attacked him with fatal results. He was accused of seeking to make himself a despot, and two false friends did him to death. It is true that his murderers were Athenians ; but no slur should be cast on Athens on that account ; for was not his best friend also an Athenian ?

334 C–337 E. This account of the advice he gave Dionysius and its sequel is intended as an admonition also to those who consult him now. The policy advised was the abolition of despotism in

EPISTLE VII

Sicily and the establishment of constitutional government, with just laws in all the cities. Dionysius, because he rejected this advice, now lives an ignoble life ; Dion, because he followed it, has met a noble death. If only Dion had been successful he would have secured for all Sicily the blessings which can only come from the reign of Law. Let his friends, therefore, follow now in his footsteps ; let them cease from party-strife and reprisals ; let them practise moderation and self-control in the hour of victory ; and, seeing that the Ideal State under a philosopher-king is now impracticable, let them form a constitution in which Law is King.

337 E–340 B. Plato, having thus concluded his " counsel " to Dion's friends, proceeds with the narrative of his relations with Dionysius. His second visit to Sicily had been ended by the outbreak of war, but he had promised to return after the war on condition that Dion was recalled from exile. But when the tyrant wished to defer the recall of Dion Plato was reluctant to return. Finally, however, he yielded to the urgent entreaties of Dionysius, backed up by the advice of Dion, his Athenian friends, and his friend Archytas of Tarentum. It was reported that Dionysius had recovered his enthusiasm for philosophy ; and Plato felt that, if this were true, he dare not miss the possible chance of seeing his dreams and Dion's fulfilled.

340 B–341 A. On this his *third visit* to Sicily Plato decided to begin by putting to the test the tyrant's interest in philosophy. The test was made by explaining the toil and time it involved owing to the length of the necessary propaedeutic. Only those

who can face the ordeal of " plain living and high thinking " survive this test.

341 B–345 C. A long *digression* is here made, dealing with Plato's views on philosophy and its teaching. Dionysius, he says, was an unsatisfactory pupil, since he claimed to be already an expert in philosophy. Later on, it is said, he wrote a treatise on metaphysics himself which he claimed to be superior to Plato's lectures. But he and all others who make such claims are impostors. The deepest doctrines do not admit of written expression, and can only be the fruit of lifelong study ; hence, says Plato, I have never written them down myself, nor would the attempt be anything but harmful (342 A).

Why the ultimate realities are thus incommunicable is shown by an analysis of philosophic apprehension and expression. *Knowledge*, and the *Real* which is its object, are approached through sense-perception and verbal description. The elements of this last are the *Name* and the *Definition* ; while what the senses perceive is the phenomenon or *Image*. And we must apprehend Name, Definition, Image and Knowledge (" the first Four ") before we attain to the Real (" the Fifth ") (342 E).

For we must be clear as to how the Real differs from the Sensible and its expression. The Name and the Definition give us *quality*, not *essence*. And Name and Definition, like the sensible Image, are never fixed but always shifting and relative. So because the nature of " the Four " is thus defective, the student who seeks to apprehend through them " the Fifth " (Ideal Reality) is filled with confusion ; for in seeking the *essence* he finds the *quality* always

intruding. And it is only by searching scrutiny of the "First Four" concomitants of apprehension that the student can hope to win through to a vision of the Real—and then only if he be of his own nature akin to that Ideal Object of reason: and that vision comes, when it does come, by a sudden flash, "as it were a light from heaven" (344 B).

The approach to Philosophy being thus arduous, no "serious" teacher would ever try to teach these "serious" themes in public or write them down. So that if Dionysius has written on metaphysics it only shows that he misunderstands the subject, and that his motive is to gain a cheap reputation for culture. For he received one lesson only on metaphysics from Plato. But whatever be the tyrant's views regarding philosophy and his own philosophic competence, it is monstrous that he should have shown such disrespect as he did to Plato, the acknowledged Master-philosopher (345 C).

345 C-350 B. The narrative of the *third Sicilian visit* is now *resumed*, after the philosophic digression; and it is a narrative of the insults heaped on Plato by Dionysius. To begin with, the latter broke his agreement by refusing to allow the revenues of the exiled Dion to be sent to him. In anger at this Plato said he would return home; but on the tyrant's proposing easier terms for Dion, he consented to remain until they got a reply from Dion. Presently, however, Dionysius turned round and said that he would have all Dion's property sold, keep a half of it for Dion's son, and let Plato take the balance to Dion (347 D).

As this happened when the sailing-season

(summer of 361 B.C.) was already over, it was useless to expostulate further ; and Plato, caged like a bird, was intent only on escaping as soon as possible. Soon after this a mutiny arose among the mercenary force at Syracuse, owing to the attempt of Dionysius to cut down their pay. For this the blame was thrown on Heracleides, the democratic leader, and his arrest was ordered. Theodotes, however, pleaded for his life, and Dionysius agreed to let him leave the country unharmed. But this agreement he broke the next day, in spite of the renewed intervention of Theodotes and Plato, by sending out soldiers to hunt for Heracleides and seize him. Luckily, however, he made his escape (349 c).

Dionysius's next piece of disrespect was to turn Plato out of the Acropolis and give him a lodging near the soldiers' quarters. And he found a new pretext for quarrelling in the visits paid by Plato to Theodotes, the friend of Dion and Heracleides, which he regarded as a slight to himself. Plato found himself threatened also with violence at the hands of the soldiers amongst whom he lived ; so he appealed for help to Archytas of Tarentum, and a Tarentine vessel was dispatched with a request to Dionysius that he should allow Plato to leave Sicily ; which request was granted (350 B).

350 B–351 E. On his return from this third Sicilian expedition Plato visited Olympia where he met Dion. Dion was eager to begin military operations against Dionysius, but Plato refused his support on the ground that he had been the guest of the tyrant and was averse to fomenting discord, foreseeing the evils that would inevitably result from

civil war. But his counsels of moderation went unheeded. Yet Dion did not seek power for his own sake but for the sake of the public good; he was not selfish or avaricious or vengeful, but strove to establish the reign of Justice in the State by just means. Prudent though he was, his fall was due to an error of judgement: he failed to gauge accurately the depth of the wickedness of the men with whom he had to deal. The dagger that slew Dion in the hour of his success plunged deep into the very heart of Sicily (351 E).

351 E–352 A. *Conclusion.*—The "counsel" based on the experiences now related has been already set forth. And the narrative of the third visit has been given at this length in order to refute distorted accounts in which Plato's acts and motives had been misrepresented. If it serves to fulfil this purpose and convince his readers that he was justified in what he said and did, he will be well content.

From this summary it will be seen that the letter is, in the main, autobiographical. Its professed object, to offer "counsel" to Dion's friends, is obviously not its chief object, since only one page (336 E-337 E) out of nearly thirty is devoted to the actual statement of that "counsel." The chief object can only be that of pleading justification for the part played by Plato in the internal affairs of Sicily and in the struggle between the rival leaders Dionysius and Dion. The main points of the argument, as derived from the personal experiences narrated, would seem to be these: First, a strong re-assertion of his political creed, namely, that it is only under the rule of the philosopher-king, or, failing

that, under the rule of just laws in a constitutional republic, that any State can hope to flourish. Plato's conviction of this was the outcome of his early experiences in Athens, and all that he saw later, both at home and abroad, only served to confirm it. Next, he wished to make it clear that this conviction, this political philosophy, was one of the main principles which had governed all his actions in regard to Sicilian affairs. He felt himself forced, as he puts it, to have dealings with Dionysius " lest he should be betraying Philosophy." When Providence seemed to be offering a splendid opportunity of realizing the philosopher's dream of the Ideal State, he felt it incumbent upon him to seize that opportunity : his conscience compelled him. Another reason for his actions which is strongly emphasized throughout the letter was his close friendship with Dion, a friendship based on community of conviction. Dion was a convert to Plato's ethical system and shared his political creed. Therefore Dion's cause and the cause of Philosophy were inextricably intertwined ; and the claims of friendship came to reinforce the claims of creed.

These are the main points pressed as supplying a justification of Plato's actions and their motives. But his actions, however well-intentioned, were not successful. Therefore much of the narrative, and of the underlying argument, is framed with the view of explaining this ill-success. The main cause lay in the character of Dionysius, who was fickle, treacherous and vain. Others who should share the blame are Dion's enemies at the Court of Syracuse, who set the tyrant against him. Instance after instance is given of the suspicion and the treachery of Diony-

sius in his dealings with Dion and with Plato, and of the prevalence of calumny at the Court of Syracuse. Nor was Dion himself wholly blameless, for it was against Plato's advice that he set out on the final enterprise against Dionysius which cost him his life.

These, then, are the main points—apart from the philosophical digression—which emerge from this lengthy, and somewhat confused, narrative. And from a consideration of these points we may gather something of the reasons which moved Plato to write this letter of self-justification. Evidently he is trying to meet hostile criticism ; and we may fairly suppose that the main points of the attack corresponded to the main points of his defence. After Dion's failure and death in 353 B.C. no doubt his supporters were ready enough to throw the blame on someone, and Plato, as his most influential adviser, was the most obvious person to blame. He, like the murderer Callippus (they would say), was an Athenian ; he, very likely, had helped to embroil Dion with Dionysius ; all his pretended influence at the Court of Syracuse had only proved mischievous, judged by results ; and, in fact, if only this Athenian had not come meddling with Sicilian affairs everything might have turned out much better. Possibly also they accused Plato of fraud in connexion with Dion's property.

It is easy enough to understand how such attacks might be made at such a crisis on the probity and good sense and consistency of Plato, and how he might have felt himself driven to defend himself against such baseless charges. But it is rather more difficult to see the relevance of what is known as

" the philosophical digression "—a passage which some critics have condemned (not unnaturally) as a spurious insertion. It may be suggested that Plato's purpose in stressing the abstruse and difficult nature of philosophy is to rebut the charge that he had failed to convert Dionysius to views shared by himself and Dion. We may also conjecture that his exposition of the nature of Reality, on which he bases his denial that metaphysics can be explained in writing, is inserted with the object of exploding the notion that Dionysius, or any of his other teachers, were philosophers at all in any true sense of the word. For it appears that Dionysius claimed to be a competent exponent of Idealism, and that many were inclined to accept his claims ; and doing so, they might be tempted to ascribe Plato's quarrel with the tyrant to professional jealousy. Or else they might argue that if Dionysius could master the subject so easily and quickly, what need can there be for the prolonged course of training prescribed by Plato ? And it is to correct such ignorance of the true nature of philosophy, and to expose the hollowness of the claims of philosophic impostors, and thereby to justify his own attitude towards Dionysius, that Plato writes at such length on the subject. He writes, also, with something like passion, because he feels that the criticisms levelled at him are levelled at Philosophy herself, and that her honour is at stake.

As regards the philosophical exposition itself, there is little or nothing that is not either expressed or implied in the statements of Idealism contained in Plato's Dialogues. Two points only need here be indicated, to supplement the paraphrase already given in our summary, and the references in the

footnotes. For one thing, the use of the term "knowledge" is somewhat confusing, since it sometimes seems to be equated with intellectual apprehension in general, and at other times with pure cognition by the reason. As applied to Reality, or the Ideas, it can, of course, only be used in this latter sense of "scientific knowledge."

The other point of technical interest is that here Ideas are postulated of artificial as well as natural objects, contrary to what Aristotle says about the Platonic theory, as well as to some well-known recent expositions of "the later Platonism." Without entering upon this controverted subject, it is enough to say here that, whether or not Plato ever adopted a later theory of the kind described, the Idealism propounded in this letter is, in all essentials, the same as "the earlier theory" of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. The Idea is the inexpressible and incommunicable Real which lies behind all existence, objective or subjective.

Now while the apologetic character of this letter is sufficiently clear, doubts have been raised as regards its historical setting. Is it really likely that Dion's followers, whether at Syracuse or at Leontini, would have written to Plato for advice, and put in writing also the criticisms and charges implied in this written answer? And can we easily imagine Plato penning this long narrative of events in Sicily for the benefit of people who must have been perfectly familiar with Sicilian history for years past? Moreover it is difficult to suppose that the tyrant Callippus would allow the dispatch of any non-official communications between Syracuse and foreign ports. These considerations seem to render it more

probable that not only is this letter an "open" letter addressed rather to the general public than to the parties named in the superscription, but that superscription itself is merely a literary device. The letter was never meant to be sent to Sicily at all. And, this being so, the natural corollary is that the hypothetical letter from Dion's party asking for advice is equally imaginary. So that what Plato is doing in this letter is to indulge in a literary fiction which enables him to publish in epistolary form what is at once a history, an apology and a manifesto. For what public, then, was this intended, if we rule out the Sicilians ? There can be little doubt as to the answer : it was the public opinion of his own countrymen which Plato was chiefly concerned to influence : the ignorant gossip, the malicious rumours, the damaging misrepresentations current at Athens, were what annoyed him most and what he was most anxious to disprove.

It may be noticed, further, that this view of the letter is supported by the points of contact it has with the *Antidosis* of Isocrates, a speech contemporary with the letter and, like it, largely autobiographical and apologetic. The way in which Isocrates there criticizes Plato and tries to belittle his work as a writer and teacher is sufficient to show the kind of misrepresentation and professional jealousy against which Plato had to contend at home. And in the defence contained in this letter there is probably much of pointed reference to those domestic critics —pseudo-philosophers of the Dionysian type, sophistical quibblers, and rhetors and writers the dupes of unstable words.

Lastly, the severity with which Sicilian luxury is

condemned, combined with the care taken to exculpate Athens from any complicity in the murder of Dion, helps to confirm the view that this seventh letter was published, in the first instance at least, for circulation in Athens and not in Syracuse.